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SUBJECT: MUST LOVE DOGS

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. Saudi attitudes toward animals exemplifies the way in which conservatism and tradition have collided with progressive thinking and western ideas to create a paradox within Saudi culture. Muslims are guided by the Qura'an and teachings of the Prophet Mohammad to be kind to animals, including dogs, despite the pervasive belief that dogs should not be raised as pets and are "dirty." In addition to the influence of conservative elements of Saudi society, their stern views toward pets, and their general abhorrence of foreign practices, there is also strong public sentiment that it is inhumane to spend money caring for animals when there are so many people in need throughout the world. Nonetheless, there are Saudis who raise dogs as pets -- despite the perception that this practice is a violation of Saudi customs and tradition. Some Saudis consider the recent focus by conservatives on the issue of pets a reflection of their decreasing "sphere of influence." END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Saudis' attitudes towards pets -- specifically dogs -- is a good example of how institutionalized interpretations of the Qura'an and conservatism have collided with exposure to western ideas and progressive thinking to create a paradox within Saudi culture. There have been numerous items in the press of late regarding cats, dogs, and other pets. It was recently reported, for example, that the Governor of Makkah banned the sale of dogs and other pets in the city upon a request from the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (Mutawa'a) because many young Saudis have been out walking dogs. The Mutawa'a, it was reported, considers this a violation of the Kingdom's culture and traditions, and special squads have begun enforcing this decision.

¶3. (U) Traditionally, Arabs have been known for their love of animals, including dogs, and the inception of Islam did not change this in principle. The dog is appreciated for its loyalty, and many tribes and individuals even carry dogs' names. In chapter XVIII of the Holy Qura'an, there is mention of a group of early Christians who fled Roman persecution and slept in a cave with their dog. After 300 years, they all arose together. The Prophet Mohammad is quoted as saying that it is permissible to raise dogs -- but only for guarding or hunting. This is likely the reason that Muslim society discourages the practice of raising dogs as pets. Additionally, there is a widespread Muslim belief that the dog's mouth and saliva, as well as its waste, are unclean. It is not uncommon, however, for other animals to be raised as pets in Muslim society. For example, a close disciple of the Prophet Mohammad, Abu Horayrah, had a nickname that was derived from the kitten he took with him wherever he went. The Prophet himself commented positively on Horayrah's habit.

¶4. (U) Kindness to animals is an important aspect of the Islamic creed. One of the examples Mohammad gave to Muslims was that of a disobedient Jewish woman who was forgiven and accepted into "God's Kingdom" because she watered a dying,

thirsty dog. He also provided the example of a "normal" woman who was thrown into Hell because she locked up a cat until it died of hunger and thirst. After Prophet Mohammad, the Muhtassebs, predecessors of the Mutawa'a, monitored the treatment of animals as part of their job, and the second successor of Mohammad, Omar, punished a camel driver for overtaxing his camel.

15. (U) Despite this emphasis on kindness, there remains in Saudi culture a very harsh attitude toward animals, which is often attributed to the stern views of the more conservative elements of the population and their suspicion and abhorrence of foreign practices -- especially non-Muslim practices. When the media publishes stories of Westerners who dedicate their wealth to animals, many conservatives recall the stories of the thousands of people who die of hunger and disease in Third World countries, as well as those who have lost their homes and lives in Afghanistan, Iraq, "Palestine," and Lebanon. They do not see the care given to dogs and cats as a sign of kindness and mercy, rather as a lack of humanity.

16. (U) The "elites" who are seen with their dogs, cats, and birds on the streets of the main Saudi cities are considered by the conservative population as westernized nouveau riches. According to them, these individuals do not really keep their pets out of kindness, but rather to show that they are "civilized --" a mentality that was allegedly used to justify the Governor of Makkah's decision to ban the sale of pets.

17. (U) COMMENT: This contrast between the words of the Qura'an and the Prophet Mohammad, which imply that kindness must be shown to animals, and the general distaste that most Muslims have for dogs is yet another of the many contradictions in Saudi society. In this instance, it is very much a struggle between the old and new. Some will say that the field of "action" for the more conservative elements of Saudi society is constricting. Therefore, there is an increased focus on the more inane issues, such as banning pets and Pokemon videos. An old joke has again come to life. A Mutawa'a's neighbor asked him how to purify a wall that had been dirtied by a dog's waste. The Mutawa'a advised that it was necessary to take the wall down and rebuild it seven times. The neighbor then asked the Mutawa'a to pay 50 percent of the wall's building and destruction costs since it separated their two homes. The Mutawa'a calmly replied, "My son, a little water can purify the wall. Islam is easy." END COMMENT.

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